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# An Open Letter to Peggy

By J. N. Hook

*Teacher training adviser in English, University of Illinois*

Dear Peggy,

I'm really happy to hear that you've decided to become an English teacher. As I told you last summer, I believe that you have enough ability to make a success of almost anything you try. If there's anywhere besides at the peace tables that we need success, it's in the classrooms. If you and I and our colleagues aren't successful in teaching, the world is likely to get into even more of a mess than it's in now.

You rather embarrass me, Peggy, with some of your questions. They're too hard for me to answer. You ask, for example, how to get started on the right foot when you're ready for your first year of teaching. Well, I'm not exactly a graybeard yet, but as I look back over thirteen years of teaching in high school and college (it seems like seven or eight years), I can think of dozens of things that would have made my own early teaching more successful. Applying little devices of pedagogy, for instance, such as learning all my students' names in the first three days, using three illustrations where two should be enough, sometimes pretending to be even more ignorant than I am, or — but this list could go on for pages. Anyhow, you'll be told most of those things in your education courses (I hope), and since you're the sort of person who will listen more attentively than I did in my college days, you'll not have to learn so much the hard way. Time alone, though, can teach you some of the little tricks of the trade that save minutes or hours and yet increase effectiveness.

The question you ask that is really a stumper, and that actually summarizes all of your other questions, is "What does it take to be a good English teacher?" That, my dear Margaret, *is* a

question, and I could say some flattering things about you for having asked it. As nearly as I can recall my years and years of college, none of my professors ever talked with their classes about that. I don't know why. I've just taken time out to thumb through a few reams of yellowed notes, and, as I suspected, there's nothing in them about the differences between a highly competent and a merely adequate teacher. Maybe professors think it's too hopelessly and youthfully idealistic to discuss the characteristics of the superior teacher, that it's useless to picture unattainable ideals of performance, that hero-worship of a few great teachers is idle. But now that you've raised the big question, I wish that my notes said less about coefficients of correlation and more about Mark Hopkins.

I've come to the conclusion, Peg, that Mark Hopkins was a great teacher because of *what he was;* and I'm prepared to broaden that generalization to read: *Every successful teacher is successful because of what he is* — not because of what he knows or what special skills or abilities he possesses, but what he is. (Did you ever think that the English language desperately needs a common gender third person singular pronoun? *Thon,* you may know, has been suggested. Anyway, in this letter whenever with masculine arrogance I use *he* to refer to *he or she,* I do mean *he or she.* Perhaps all great chefs are men, but great teachers, as often as not, are women — women who spend their lives teaching the third grade, or sophomore English, in Littleville, women who — you may complete the eulogy for yourself.)

Knowledge and skills aren't to be despised, of course. Many teachers get into difficulties because they lack one or the other. Maybe sometime, if you urge me enough, I'll write you a letter about the knowledge and special abilities that the successful English teacher possesses, but today I'm going to toss in a few ideas about what the highly competent English teacher is, what his personal qualities are. The teacher I'm going to describe is a composite of many teachers — high school English teachers especially — in whose classes I have sat. I've never known anyone who possessed, in adequate amounts, all of these qualities. But I've found it worth while, and some of my former students who are now teachers tell me that they've found it valuable, to hold in mind some such set of ideal qualities. None of us will ever be what this composite teacher is, but nevertheless he's a light toward which we can steer our wandering bark through rough waters. (Pretty trite metaphor, isn't it?) Let's call our light The Teacher.

Although he is always ready to grant that the work of other people may be as significant as his own, The Teacher constantly recognizes the importance, the value, of his own work. You and I have known teachers of English for whom teaching was only a hamburger shop along the route to a husband and a hacienda. These teachers taught commas because the course of study said that they should; they taught Shakspere because Shakspere is always taught in English, and they taught oral English because they didn't have to prepare lessons for the days when the boring little brats "made speeches." They had no respect for the work they were doing — perhaps they sometimes wondered why taxpayers' money was wasted on teaching commas —, and inwardly, it may be, they had no respect for themselves.

But The Teacher knows that he is not teaching commas, Shakspere, or oral English. He is teaching students to organize their thoughts, to express themselves clearly in an age when clarity of thought and statement may save humanity from extermination, and to understand the thoughts and feelings of other people, in the classroom, in a distant state, on the other side of the world, or in another century. Teaching those things is important, and The Teacher knows that it is. A word is only a group of letters, a punctuation mark is only an ink spot, and a sentence is only a conglomeration of letters and ink — until The Teacher makes of the letters and the ink something bigger, something meaningful, a representation of man's ability to think thoughts bigger than himself. From ink in students' fountain pens and from ink that was once wet on a printing press, The Teacher creates constructive thoughts, orderliness, understanding, and tolerance. It's a job that challenges by its bigness.

The Teacher himself possesses the tolerance that he tries to instill in his students. Not in the narrow sense of "toleration." Not that he "tolerates" Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Negroes, Mexicans, Japanese, obstreperous boys, and girls who can converse only on movies, clothes, and dates. Mere tolerating is not being tolerant. I may tolerate (put up with) a mouse simply because I can't get rid of the mouse. But I'm not truly tolerant of mice unless I like and respect them and try to see the mice's point of view. That's hard as far as mice are concerned; when I think of mice, I think in terms of *I* and *they*. I don't know how The Teacher thinks about mice, but I do know how he thinks about his students. He does not merely put up with them. He likes them, respects them, tries to see their point of view, and thinks of them in terms of *we*, not *I* and *they*.

Take Johnny, for example. Johnny is a trouble-maker, at least for other teachers, and sometimes even for The Teacher. Johnny: High school freshman. Age 15. IQ 80. Two years in first grade. Mechanical ability. Little ambition. A school problem for nine years. Juvenile court record. Parents divorced. Other teachers have tolerated Johnny, because he has to stay in school, against his will and theirs, until he is sixteen. Over their coffee they call him a bad one and say that the reform school is the place for him. But since they can't get rid of Johnny, who to them is a mouse, they tolerate him. The Teacher, though, is tolerant of him. He asks Johnny to ride with him in his Chevrolet to try to find the source of a noise. "It ain't — uh, isn't — nothin' but loose tappets," says Johnny. The Teacher already knew that, but he thanks Johnny for helping him. He talks with Johnny, finds out what makes Johnny tick. Johnny won't ever be President, or Mayor, or Alderman. But he'll be a darned good auto mechanic, unless the reform school gets him first. A little more tolerence and a little less tolerating will make Johnny a useful citizen. A little more tolerance and a little less tolerating will solve bigger problems than Johnny can present—and I do not refer only to schools.

The Teacher is adaptable. Perhaps he grew up in New York City and is teaching in Littleville. Maybe he was born on a Nebraska farm and is teaching in Los Angeles. Possibly his school has had three different superintendents in the last three years. Maybe at nine o'clock The Teacher has a class of super-par college preparatory seniors, and at ten o'clock a class of sub-normal ninth graders who can read a simple poem by John Masefield and get only an inkling of what it's about. Regardless of the contrasts he faces, The Teacher is flexible enough to do the right thing at the right time. He can lead his college preps through a stimulating discussion of why Hamlet was Hamlet, and spend the next hour in substituting Robert Service for Masefield the Incomprehensible. The day before the big game, he can relate some of the items in the lesson to the only topic that at the moment interests nine-tenths of the class, and the class will learn as much that day as usual. When the class mood is a rollicking one, The Teacher can be frolicsome too, and when war or other shadows emerge from the nebulous world that is generally around the students but not of them, he can be as serious as an owl in hearing their opinions.

The Teacher has an active imagination. That implies, for one thing, physical and mental alertness. There have been too many dead fish teaching English. Too often the genesis of an English teacher has been as follows: A college freshman gets B's in composition, C's in his other subjects. In his sophomore year, he

gets B's in literature, B's, C's, and D's in other things. Comes the junior year. He must declare a major. Since English has been easiest for him, he writes "English" on the little white card. Halfway through the junior year, he wonders what he can do with an English major. Nothing but teach, apparently. So he takes some courses in education, scrapes through his practice teaching, and becomes the English Department at Petiteburg. His sole qualification: having met the countables — so many hours, so many courses, such a grade average, so many letters of reference which do not quite damn with their faint praise.

But The Teacher isn't like that. He is alert, eager, imaginative. He teaches because he likes to teach, and he wants to make his teaching as effective as possible because it's more fun that way. So he experiments, tries this and that. Scientific accuracy? Possibly. Control groups? Could be. But whether or not his experimentation is scientific, he works imaginatively to improve his teaching. He never teaches a course twice in exactly the same way. Beneath his calmness he is restless, pioneering; goaded by *il ne sait quoi,* westering he explores.

The Teacher's imaginativeness reveals itself frequently in creative writing — not for publication, but for writing's effect upon him. He likes to write; he must write. And he knows that he can better interpret literature if he himself has experienced literary parturition. More important, he knows that through writing he can better understand the difficulties of the thirty-three juniors who have to turn in a finished composition on Friday. So The Teacher piles into a drawer his poems, his essays, his stories, his first draft of The Great American Novel; and then he starts another drawer.

The Teacher has a sense of humor. I've sometimes told my methods classes that I've been tempted to adopt as a text Leon Ormond's *Laugh and Learn.* Ormond's thesis is that people learn most readily when the conditions of learning are made pleasant. Something like digestion, I suppose. You know that a person can eat more and digest more readily if mealtime is enjoyable. But if people are all tensed up at their meals, they don't swallow much, and what they do swallow gives them ulcers. Well, a classroom is something like a dining room. Teacher is the host.

In effect, Ormond says: Down with the teacher whose classroom manner says that smiles are unholy and that laughter is blasphemous; hurrah for the schoolmarm who dares to be as good fun in the classroom as she is at the bridge party. The Teacher is human inside his classroom. And what does being human mean, Peggy? What lifts man above the other animals? A musician may

say that it's his musical ability, a scientist that it's his possession of a useful thumb, a linguist that it's his flexible use of language, a minister that it's his religion, and a historian that it's knowing the events of the past. But you and The Teacher and forty million kids know that man became man the first time he ever laughed at anything more subtle than another's misfortune.

Tired of my harangue, Peggy? Well, I'll add just one thing more to this very incomplete answer to your big question. Besides recognizing the importance of his work, and besides being tolerant, adaptable, imaginative, and humanly humorous, The Teacher is professional in his outlook. That means that he wants to improve the profession, bring other capable people into it, give more than he gets. It implies that although he tries to improve the working conditions of his profession, he won't whine about them or brag about how much more money he could make in industry. Being professional means too that he subscribes to professional magazines, attends meetings, backs worthy professional activities. It includes his own carefully formulated code of professional ethics. And it means that he regards his work, the enrichment of the minds of youth, as the finest method he has of defending his own right to existence, of justifying the ways of a man to God.

Once more, I'm glad that you're going to be an English teacher, Peggy! Write again soon.

# Four Years of English?

By Louise Lane

West High School, Aurora

Many schools have slashed the requirement of four years of high school English to three, with a fourth year elective. If there were a fourth year English course, a very practical one for students who need special help, would the English teachers be alone in their stand for a fourth required year for every student?

Every senior taking the college preparatory course will tell you how valuable his last year of English proved to be when he came face to face with the college entrance examinations in English. As he reviewed during the last year in high school, he obtained a good hold on those fundamentals in grammar which he had previously passed over but had not absorbed. His going to college, once a dream but now a reality, had given him a new incentive to grasp all he could during this last year in high school. He also, by writing a theme a week, gained confidence in

his ability to express himself on paper. He learned to be alert for some of those stumbling blocks which so easily tripped him — the comma splice, the misspelled word, the short, choppy, uninteresting sentence. By giving at least one oral theme a quarter, he improved his ability to speak before a group. The book reports, requiring the reading of several classics and several non-fiction works, widened his cultural horizon. The English literature studied gave him an acquaintance with pieces of literature termed "great" by every scholar.

Since every student who enters college will agree that his last year of high school English proved to be invaluable, there doesn't seem to be any argument about whether or not college preparatory students should have a fourth year of English. I feel confident that if the fourth year were elective, every senior planning to go to college would choose to take it.

Many of our vocational students, the poorer commercial ones, and those in our general courses have struggled through three years of English failing altogether or just passing. Is it not a challenge to us, the senior English teachers, to give these students a last chance to grasp fundamentals they will need in the near future and to give them a liking for reading other than funny books, picture magazines, and pulp magazine stories?

By making the fourth year of English elective, we eliminate the very people we want most to reach. The teachers who complain "Why, he can't even read," "He can't spell," "He doesn't know how to interpret instructions given him" are some of the very teachers who say a fourth year of English is a waste of time. Can't we convince these teachers if we show them satisfactory results of a practical course for these students? If, during a fourth year course for these people, we throw out all conventional rules for the teaching of English and present the necessary tools in a new, unique way, won't these students realize the necessity of grasping them?

During the last year, the students can very easily be divided according to their future plans, not necessarily their I.Q.'s. Those who know that they are going to attend college or are going to do highly specialized work requiring the ability to write correctly, speak well, and know the world's great literature should sign up for the regular English IV course.

If the student is one who plans to do shop work, filing, clerking, or any other type of work not requiring technical grammar nor an acquaintance with the greater literature, why not give him a chance to choose between the regular English IV course and an English course which will better fit him for everyday life?

Since we can assume that students who have chosen the general English course will discontinue their formal education at the end of this their fourth year, we should attempt to help them perfect only the English they will need to get along in life.

We can help them write letters correctly and effectively. Since jobs are soon to be secured and graduation gifts acknowledged, application letters and thank you notes are very timely. Because friends will be scattering after graduation, there will be a need for knowing how to write interesting, friendly letters. A last chance should be given to make sure of the spelling of words needed to fill out any kind of questionnaire. Help should be given in clearly and explicitly stating the facts in filing claims for articles lost or damaged in shipment. Since stating want ads tersely saves money, the student will easily see the need for writing effective want ads.

In this course, help can also be given in interpreting newspaper and radio advertisements and in being discerning about "bargains." Stress can be laid on reading and interpreting paragraphs before signing such papers as contracts and insurance policies. In the course, the teacher can deal with interviews — information needed for interviews, what to expect in an interview, and how to dress properly and conduct oneself during an interview.

Reading movie and radio reviews and learning to distinguish between good and bad movies and radio programs should help the student to be more discriminating in his choice of entertainment. A few weeks of the course might cover movies and another few weeks, radio.

It is a generally known fact that a person does not raise the level of his reading tastes after finishing high school unless he goes on to school or unless he makes a concentrated effort to better himself. One of the most important purposes of this practical English course should be to acquaint the students with good material — both in books and magazines — which is on his level, satisfies his interests, and is at the same time interesting reading. Too often we insist that these poorer students read material which we call good but which has no interest for them and which is completely out of their range of comprehension. We should also make an effort to wean this type of student away from a steady diet of funny books and picture magazines.

These are only a few of the everyday problems which would come under the heading of English. Every teacher of English could, probably, make at least one course of study from situations pertinent to her students.

With every English teacher on the alert, we could take a definite stand for four years of English for every student, and would graduate from our schools students who have a greater feeling of confidence as they take their places either in college or in the working world.

## Bargain Rates on Back Issues

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High school teachers of English should glean from the compositions written by their students those which might be submitted for inclusion in "Some of the Best Illinois High School Writing of 1947," to be published as the January 1948 issue of the *Illinois English Bulletin.* All contributions should be addressed to Illinois English Bulletin, 204a Lincoln Hall, Urbana, Illinois. Each manuscript should bear the name of the author, the name of his high school, and the name of his English teacher. No manuscripts will be returned unless they are accompanied by return postage.

THE EDITOR